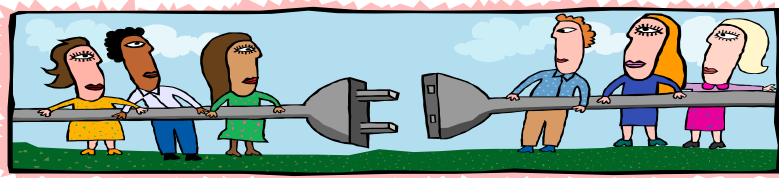


# Consumer Connection



*Informed Consumers, Quality Utility Services, and a Dedicated Organization for Missourians in the 21st Century*

Issue 6 - April 2003

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Public Information & Education Department

## **Current Natural Gas Prices Could Mean Significantly Higher Gas Bills Next Winter**

With natural gas prices spiking to near record levels in late February, most natural gas companies under PSC jurisdiction have made filings with the PSC reflecting an increase in natural gas rates.

Natural gas injections into storage this summer at prices higher than the summer of 2002, could mean higher natural gas bills for consumers next winter.

Several factors are causing the current spike in natural gas prices:

- High crude oil prices
- A colder than normal winter
- Significantly lower storage levels
- Lower natural gas production

### **The PSC does not regulate wholesale supplier rates.**

The PSC does, however, review the purchasing practices of local natural gas companies to ensure they purchased natural gas supplies prudently and made reasonable decisions in those purchases given the facts and circumstances that existed at the time the purchases were made.

Natural gas companies under PSC jurisdiction are generally allowed to adjust rates to reflect wholesale natural gas price changes four times per year.

### **Ways to lower your gas bill:**

- Look into energy saving tips and programs.
- Consider enrolling in an average or budget-billing plan.
- Add attic insulation if necessary.
- Place weather stripping around doors and windows.
- Change or replace furnace filters each month if needed.
- Have your chimney checked for blockage.
- Have heating system checked and tuned-up if needed.
- Close fireplace dampers when fireplace is not being used.
- Place an approved insulated cover-jacket around your hot water heater. Set water heater at 120 degrees.

### **What to do if you can't pay your bill:**

- Contact your local utility company.
- State you are unable to pay in full.
- Apply for energy assistance at your local Division of Family Services office.
- Enter into a payment agreement with the gas company.

The **ELECTRONIC FILING AND INFORMATION SYSTEM (EFIS)** is the Missouri Public Service Commission's web-based electronic document management system. It contains public documents that can be accessed through your Internet browser.

**FOR THE PUBLIC:** The general public can access information found under the web heading "Resources."

In addition, the general public can submit informal complaints regarding their utility service provider(s), or make public comments on a pending issue before the Missouri Public Service Commission.

The general public has access to on-line viewing of current utility company tariffs, which list all rights and responsibilities of the consumer, as well as the utility and jurisdictional rates that pertain to utility services.

### **On The Web**

[www.psc.state.mo.us/efis.asp](http://www.psc.state.mo.us/efis.asp)

### **Hours Of Operation**

The Electronic Filing and Information System is available from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

### **Toll-Free EFIS Helpdesk Line**

(8 a.m. - 5 p.m.)  
(866) 365-0924

### **After Hours**

Use EFIS on-line Help functions.

**Note:** Commission hearings held in Room 310 of the Governor Office Building can be viewed live on the PSC Webcast [www.psc.state.mo.us](http://www.psc.state.mo.us). You may also view a monthly hearing schedule from this area, or return to the main page and click on Hearing Schedule.





## **INTERNET CONNECTION FEES**

Many times consumers are surprised to find out that they have been billed for a long distance call without their knowledge just because they logged onto the Internet. Consumers should carefully read all the information when setting up software to connect to their Internet provider. Some computer settings may result in a consumer paying toll (long distance) charges for the entire time they are connected to the Internet.

### **Helpful information:**

- During the initial setup of connection software, Internet providers usually will assign phone numbers (both primary and secondary) to a consumer's computer for access to the Internet. The numbers selected connect the consumer to the provider's closest location (or server). This number may be a toll call. Even where the closest location is a local call, the program may search for a secondary location (if the first is busy) that may be more distant, or in a different calling area, again resulting in a toll call.
- While most internet providers warn their customers to check with their local telephone company to verify that a telephone number is a local call, it is the customer's responsibility to ensure that ALL the numbers (both primary and secondary) that the computer may call are local calls. Failure to ensure that numbers dialed by the computer are local could result in unexpected and unwanted long distance charges. Consumers are responsible for toll calls made from their telephone number, whether they dial the call themselves or their computer dials the call.
- Confirm, by reviewing the settings of your Internet programs, that all of the connection numbers are within your local calling area. Your telephone directory can assist you in determining what calls are local. When in doubt, call your local telephone company. In addition, your Internet provider can give assistance on changing the "dial-up" setting in your program.

**NOTE:** The Missouri Public Service Commission does not regulate Internet providers, wireless phone service or cable television. For additional information, contact the Federal Communications Commission at 1-888-225-5322 or [www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov).



## **Local Plus vs. Toll Value**

If you subscribed to SWB/SBC's Local Plus calling plan, you know that Southwestern Bell eliminated the plan in February 2003. In its place is a new calling option called the Toll Value plan. With Local Plus, residential subscribers were allowed unlimited toll calling to a specific calling area for \$34.99 per month (adjusted July 10, 2002 to \$32.95). Now, instead of unlimited calling, these calls are capped at 1,000 minutes per month for \$32.95 and 9 cents per minute above the cap.

For households using this calling plan for internet service, this was quite upsetting, especially if your internet connection required a toll call.

We received hundreds of complaints/inquiries regarding this issue and can offer this explanation:

1. SWB was not required by the FCC nor the Missouri Commission to withdraw the Local Plus service.
2. SWB is required to pay other local telephone companies per minute charges for terminating Local Plus calls. Therefore, as Local Plus usage increased, SWB's expenses to provide the service also increased. SWB's primary reason for withdrawing Local Plus is that the service may not recover its cost.
3. SWB could have withdrawn the plan completely, but chose to introduce new calling plans that will enable most Local Plus subscribers to save money over the existing Local Plus plan, such as the Toll Value plan.
4. The Missouri Commission determined that flexibility in the design and provisioning of expanded calling scope plans serves the public interest. Prohibiting a company from changing expanded calling plans could potentially discourage companies from offering new expanded calling plans.
5. The Missouri Commission urges consumers to check out alternatives -- many other companies besides SWB offer interexchange telecommunications services. Consumers may also benefit from packages offered by wireless providers.

**For printed materials** regarding a number of consumer issues or copies of this newsletter, please call 573-751-7491 or email [joyceneuner@psc.state.mo.us](mailto:joyceneuner@psc.state.mo.us)

### **Who to Contact:**

Missouri Public Service Commission  
Consumer Hotline **1-800-392-4211**  
or email: [pscinfo@psc.state.mo.us](mailto:pscinfo@psc.state.mo.us)



### **Mail your inquiry or complaint to:**

Missouri Public Service Commission  
Consumer Services Department  
P.O. Box 360  
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0360